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Committee on Conferences
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Draft report

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VI. Translation and interpretation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. At its 506th and 508th meetings, on 30 August and 1 September 2010, the Committee on Conferences considered section V of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, concerning matters related to translation and interpretation (A/65/122), including succession planning (paras. 49 and 50), quality control of contractual translation (paras. 51-60), the impact of freelance recruitment on the quality of interpretation (para. 61), the financial and administrative implications of raising or waiving the mandatory age of separation for language staff (interpreters, translators/précis-writers, editors, verbatim reporters and proofreaders/copy preparers) (paras. 62-69) and specific challenges faced by the United Nations Office at Nairobi (paras. 70-75). In light of the acute demographic transition in the language services expected to take place in the next five years, the Department had begun implementing a proactive succession planning programme, which focused on outreach to universities and streamlining of competitive examinations for language services. Despite a largely inadequate budget allocation for training resources, the Department had made every effort to maintain language-related services. The present arrangement was not sustainable, however, and the Department would need permanent and dedicated capacity to conduct, coordinate and monitor training and outreach activities effectively in the future. Flexibility in applying the mandatory age of retirement for language staff would also ease the demographic transition.

2. While the quality of freelance interpreters had generally been adequate, there were real challenges related to the availability of interpretation services at short notice, the fierce global competition for such resources, which were scarce, and the fact that the conditions of employment for interpreters at the United Nations were not as competitive as those offered by other institutions. All four duty stations had made efforts to increase the share of translation done contractually without sacrificing the requisite quality of the documents processed. The United Nations

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Office at Vienna, which had historically lacked established capacity to monitor and control the quality of the large proportion of documentation processed externally, would soon benefit from the reclassification of posts to the senior reviser (P-5) level, a change which had been supported by the General Assembly; it was expected that the increase in staff costs would be offset by the savings arising from a higher number of pages translated contractually. Such was not the case at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, unfortunately, where the high percentage of outsourced translation called for more robust quality assurance. Other challenges faced in Nairobi related to the significant increase in the number of meetings held at the renovated conference facilities and the continued difficulty in attracting and retaining high-quality interpreters and translators. It was thus proposed that six interpreter and six senior reviser posts should be upgraded from the P-4 to the P-5 level.

3. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi participated via videoconference in the 508th meeting of the Committee on 1 September and discussed the theme of outreach, including training and internships. Memorandums of understanding signed with universities facilitated cooperation and helped programmes in interpretation and translation to gear their training towards the needs of employers such as the United Nations. Fourteen universities had already signed memorandums of understanding with the United Nations, with three more Arabic-language universities to follow suit before the end of 2010. The Department had entered into an official relationship with universities covering all six official languages. The language internship programme launched by the Department in cooperation with the Office of Human Resources Management in the summer of 2009 had been expanded in 2010 to other language occupations and duty stations.

4. There were, however, no dedicated staff resources for outreach activities. Staff members were reallocated from other activities, sometimes combining outreach visits with home leave or personal travel, for example. Furthermore, the position of Training and Coordination Officer created at Headquarters was not an established post, and the lack of dedicated resources was limiting the scope of possible activities.

Geneva

5. The Director of the Division of Conference Management at the United Nations Office at Geneva said that the Division had made outreach activities an important objective in its work programme, given the urgency of finding replacements for the large number of retiring language staff (69 between 2010 and 2015). The Division had welcomed 14 interns from six different academic institutions thus far in 2010.

Vienna

6. A special feature in Vienna had been the use of "traineeship" arrangements, in which young language professionals who had not yet passed competitive examinations were hired at a modest salary to work on site, thus benefiting from close mentoring while contributing to the output of the language services. Student internships also continued to be offered. In addition, a varied programme of training to upgrade the substantive knowledge and technical skills of staff was offered.

Nevertheless, to meet staff development needs in the interest of long-term quality and performance, more training funds were needed.

Nairobi

7. Through the collective efforts of the Department, the high vacancy rates traditionally experienced at Nairobi had improved significantly; outreach, training and internships were very important in ensuring that the pool of possible future qualified language staff was broadened. With that in mind, the "Africa project" had been initiated, with the aim of building up conference-servicing capacity within African countries, particularly in the areas of translation and interpretation. The Department, through its Division in Nairobi, had taken the lead. The African Development Bank had begun a feasibility study to seek financial support to implement training programmes in Africa. The University of Nairobi had introduced a master's programme in translation and interpretation in Arabic, English, French and Kiswahili, and the European Union and various European universities with established language programmes were supporting that pilot programme. Universities in Mozambique and South Africa would soon begin programmes as well, and similar efforts were under way in Cameroon, Egypt and Senegal. With the continued support of the Department, the European Union and the African Development Bank, in a few years it would be possible that qualified interpreters and translators from African countries would be working in Africa as well as in other regions of the world.

Discussion

8. The German Translation Service at Headquarters was commended for the excellent services it provided to Member States. The Committee expressed interest in the outreach programme to universities, including the signing of a number of memorandums of understanding. Additional information was provided, including a list of the universities involved thus far and the model memorandum of understanding. Interest was also expressed in the Department's efforts to streamline the competitive examinations for language services. Concern was expressed at the lack of effective roster management across duty stations. Clarification was requested on the measures taken to harmonize procedures for the different competitive examinations used to select staff. It was suggested that the Department should seek funding for interns, including through private institutions, in order to give students a further incentive to apply for internships with the United Nations.

9. A representative of the Secretariat said that the memorandums of understanding signed with universities provided, inter alia, pedagogical assistance in order to prepare students for language competitive examinations. Participating universities are required to meet a number of criteria determined by a steering group established for that purpose. Competitive examinations for language services did not take into account either gender or nationality, but focused solely on specialized language skills. Examination venues were decided on the basis of the location of applicants, who had to pay their own way to sit the examinations, but were not targeted at specific regions. A recently designed outreach portal on language career opportunities at the United Nations and the memorandums of understanding were expected to improve visibility for the examinations. As regards the streamlining of the competitive examinations, a consultant had been hired to make specific recommendations, and a panel of experts had been established to take action on

them. Given that the Department was carrying out the bulk of its outreach activities without dedicated resources, it was difficult to envisage contacting United Nations agencies and private institutions to seek funding for interns, but it was an interesting suggestion that could be reviewed should the Department receive additional funding in future.

10. Members of the Committee were informed that translations processed through contractual translations in New York in the first seven months of 2010 accounted for 27 per cent of the total compared with 25 per cent in 2008. In Vienna, the proportion had increased to 30 per cent, compared to 25 per cent for the same period of 2009, and in Geneva the level had remained above 20 per cent in 2009 and 2010. Quality control of contractual translation was performed by senior revisers at the P-5 level. In order to ensure the availability of staff at the required level, five posts in Vienna had been upgraded in the current biennium. A system of more consistent quality checks in all duty stations had assisted in monitoring and improving output quality.

11. More information was requested about the budgetary impact of the reclassification of posts for quality control in Vienna. It was noted that quality control must be a function performed in-house by senior staff, and the Committee asked whether freelance staff fulfilled that role at any duty station. An analysis of the unit cost of internal versus external processing was requested.

12. A representative of the Secretariat explained that the reclassification of posts for quality control in Vienna had been requested during the previous budget cycle but that it had not been approved until the current biennium. The cost savings from the increased use of contractual processing was expected to offset the cost of the post upgrades. In addition to carrying out quality control functions, senior revisers assisted with training and terminology. It was generally recognized that a maximum level for contractual processing would be reached beyond which the achievement of quality benchmarks for United Nations documentation, which remained the top priority, would be compromised. The Department was in the processes of analysing its costing methodologies and establishing globally standardized performance indicators and costing models, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 64/243.

13. In recent years, the Department had argued that flexibility in applying the mandatory age of retirement for language staff would ease the demographic transition. Several delegations expressed the view that the Department should have acted earlier to address the increase in retirements currently anticipated, which were predictable. Others felt that the statistics on forthcoming retirements did not bear out the sense of urgency accorded to the situation. Information was requested on the basis for the current retirement age and the practice in comparator organizations. One delegation wondered how many language staff would actually agree to stay on. Another delegation expressed dismay at the statement in paragraph 68 of the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/65/122) that "the proposal to raise the mandatory separation age for language staff would not have any adverse impact" on the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund. Several delegations expressed reluctance to consider raising the mandatory retirement age for just one category of staff, noting that, in any case, the issue would require thorough discussion in the General Assembly and the International Civil Service Commission.

14. A representative of the Secretariat said that the Department had been addressing the issue of anticipated retirements in the context of its succession

planning efforts for the past four years. Raising the retirement age would provide more stability in the staffing table and ensure the availability of senior staff for the training of new staff members.

Special challenges faced by the United Nations Office at Nairobi

15. Clarification was sought as to the reasons for the scarcity of qualified translators and interpreters at the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the steps taken thus far to address such challenges. A delegation asked for an explanation why the Department had not requested the proposed upgrade of posts from the P-4 to the P-5 level during the previous year's budgetary negotiations. A more specific and feasible recommendation to Member States regarding the proposed upgrade was requested, as was clarification on whether the upgrade, if agreed to, would have programme budget implications. Several delegations questioned the justification for the urgent upgrade of 12 posts, citing the significantly lower output of the Office at Nairobi compared with other duty stations.

16. An update on the implementation of the Africa project was needed, including action taken thus far by the African Development Bank and any other international partners. A specific recommendation to Member States regarding how they might support the project was requested.

17. A representative of the Secretariat said that in order to improve the vacancy rates, the chiefs of translation and interpretation services at Nairobi had gone to great lengths to reach out personally to language professionals. Efforts were also being made to change the perception of Nairobi as a less desirable duty station. Eleven-month contracts had been given to interpreters who had not yet passed the competitive examination but who had worked at the Office at Nairobi for years and were known to be reliable. It was difficult to attract interns to Nairobi not only because they were required to be enrolled in a master's programme, which were not widespread in Africa, but also because they were not paid, except for a modest travel allowance.

18. The proposed recommendation to reclassify a number of P-4 posts to the P-5 level in Nairobi was necessary not only to adequately reflect the principle of equal grade for equal work, but also to ensure quality control for the high percentage of contractual translation produced by that Office. The proposed upgrade would also have a positive impact on the ability to attract and retain staff at Nairobi. The Department had decided during the previous year's budgetary negotiations to request the conversion of several extrabudgetary posts to regular budget posts rather than to upgrade posts because of what it had perceived to be longer-term benefits. It was nevertheless of the utmost importance to address the remaining discrepancies among duty stations.

19. The Department took into account all staffing-related matters and had adopted an incremental approach to advocating such changes. It would take the matter up in the context of the budget submission for the biennium 2012-2013.

20. The start of the Africa project had been delayed because the African Development Bank had not completed the feasibility study. It was expected that the graduates of the relevant programmes, if successful in the competitive examinations, would be recruited immediately. The mobilization by the United Nations Office at Nairobi of additional resources for the project would be difficult, as the Office had no capacity to devote to fund-raising.